# Area Plan Summary University Avenue Transit-Oriented Development Framework: SNELLING AND LEXINGTON AREAS

25 February 2004

#### Addendum to the Comprehensive Plan for Saint Paul

Recommended by the Planning Commission (July 25, 2003) Adopted by the City Council (February 25, 2004)

This summary appends to the Comprehensive Plan the vision and strategies of the University Avenue Transit-Oriented Development Framework: Snelling and Lexington Areas.

Copies of the full-length plans are available for review at the Saint Paul Department of Planning and Economic Development and the offices of the Hamline Midway Coalition, Thomas-Dale Planning Council, Summit-University District Council, Lex-Ham Community Council, Snell-Ham Community Council, Merriam Park Community Council, and St. Anthony Park Community Council.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The City of Saint Paul in partnership with community stakeholders initiated a planning study to identify transit-oriented development opportunities at two key University Avenue intersections: Snelling Avenue and Lexington Parkway. The goal of the study was to build off the recent successes and major investments along the avenue and identify redevelopment opportunities for a number of key properties that have become run-down, vacant, or outdated.

University Avenue is the spine connecting the two downtowns and has historically been the main commercial street of the region. University Avenue is currently a major transit line with the highest ridership in the region. The City's Comprehensive Plan identifies University Avenue as the alignment preferred by the City for light rail transit in the Central Corridor. As the region continues to grow and congestion increases, this central regional location is becoming increasingly valuable for residents and businesses. City, community and business leaders are eager to see these critical intersections revitalized with new development that is transit-oriented. Transit-oriented development (TOD) encourages compact, pedestrian-friendly development with a high density of employment and housing within walking distance of a major public transportation stop. Numerous examples of TOD already exist along University Avenue.

The primary goal of the study is to provide the City of Saint Paul with a development framework that identifies potential for new development in these areas over the next 5-20 years.

### **Location and Current Land Use**

The two focus areas of this study are Snelling Avenue/University Avenue and Lexington Parkway/University Avenue. They were chosen based upon the existence of vacant and underutilized land and their proximity to an existing major Twin Cities public transportation route.

The Snelling Avenue TOD study area is roughly bounded by Charles Avenue to the north, Pa scal Avenue to the east, St. Anthony Avenue to the south and Fry Street/Roy Street to the west. The Lexington Parkway TOD study area is bounded by University Avenue/Charles Avenue to the north, Oxford Street/Lexington Parkway to the east, St. Anthony Avenue/Fuller Avenue to the south and Syndicate Street/Griggs Street to the west.

In general the corridor contains a variety of land uses including auto-oriented restaurants, large-scale, big-box regional shopping centers, small-shop proprietors, seasonal merchants, specialty retailers, medical clinics/offices, mixed-use developments, wholesalers, industrial operations, housing, and services. In each quadrant and throughout the study area there is also a wide mix of residential land uses: single family detached, single family attached, rental apartments, units over commercial, and high-rise living. However at key locations there also exist vacant buildings, underutilized lots and undeveloped parcels - reminders that transition and change are currently taking place.

The Midway Shopping Center, Midway Marketplace, and the Target store represent the largest regional shopping area in the city of Saint Paul, occupying the superblocks bounded by Snelling Avenue, University Avenue, I-94, and Syndicate Avenue. There are two sizeable new/used car dealerships in the study area, Whitaker Buick and Midway Chevrolet, both located on the north side of University Avenue.

#### **Vision and Goals**

#### Overarching: Improve and strengthen the Midway area.

Maintain and strengthen the established neighborhoods, and local and regional businesses. Improving the area includes:

- Removing blighting influences
- Creating new development that enhances the commercial and residential environments

#### 1. Increase the volume and variety of housing types, prices, and choices

A variety of housing types, prices, and choices is critical for a diverse, vibrant neighborhood. These include: single family, multi family, single and multi level units, rental and ownership.

#### 2. Increase Jobs, Tax Base and Economic Development

An increase in economic activity, jobs and the tax base directly contributes to the economic health and vibrancy of the community, city and region. This framework seeks to maintain and enhance the viability of commercial activities.

- Increase property and sales tax base
- Increase customers and vitality
- Maintain and strengthen the regional center and provide opportunities for new businesses
- More employees/jobs per acre

#### 3. High Quality of Life

In addition to strong housing and commercial activities, a high quality of life, from a land use and planning perspective, requires places for people. The means to achieve this include:

A. Prominent Public Realm. A prominent public realm is essential to maintaining and increasing property value and quality of life. "Public realm" includes not only publicly owned property, but also publicly used spaces. Components include: parks, open spaces and plazas, civic places, paths/sidewalks, streets, boulevards.

<u>B. Clear, Connected Patterns</u>. Clear and connected patterns provide and enhance the ability of places to be safe, accessible and allow a number of options for people to move about the community. Components include: streets, blocks, sidewalks and bicycle paths, and improved public transportation systems including Bus Rapid Transit and/or Light Rail Transit. New significant developments should be analyzed for their impact on traffic and these patterns/components.

<u>C. Mix of Building Uses and Types</u>. In light of the Midway's urban, transportation corridor environment, a high quality of life will also be achieved by furthering the existing pattern of a mix of building uses and types. A mix of building uses and types provides variety, choice and activity to a place, encourages a more efficient use of land, transportation, and infrastructure, and may reduce auto travel demand. A mix need not be achieved in each building but within a block or two of the development site. Components include: residential, commercial and retail, office, mixed-use, public and civic (i.e. library, place of worship, community center, etc.).

#### Recommendations

## **Snelling Development Concepts**

The Snelling/University intersection has obvious and subtle development opportunities. The obvious include the now vacant bus garage site along St. Anthony and the adjacent land owned by the shopping center. The less obvious development opportunities include developing land that is currently underutilized parking. If suggested road changes occur, new development opportunities may arise to bring in more retail/commercial uses. The overall strategies for the Snelling/University Intersection include:

- intensification of commercial uses
- creating clearer patterns of movement for automobiles, pedestrians, and bicycles

## **Midway Shopping Center**

The development of Midway Shopping Center will occur in phases over time as opportunities

arise. The suggested development scenarios for the Midway Shopping Center have the following goals:

- 1. Improve automobile and pedestrian movement patterns specifically:
- create clearer, easier to navigate patterns of movement, preferably more of the standard block size in scale;
- solve the problems at the automobile entrance on Pascal near University, preferably by moving the drive south if and when redevelopment of the center occurs;
- create safe pedestrian and bicycle paths through the center to transit stops and adjacent neighborhoods;
- insure new patterns help make easy connections into the Midway Marketplace, specifically looking at how traffic can move east and west through the entire regional shopping area;
- create a high quality public realm that enhances the value of the area.
- 2. Develop the vacant land south of the shopping center to create the highest number of jobs and commercial activity possible and strengthen the regional commercial center. Specifically, the goal is to support creation of transit garage and hub, however if a bus garage is not feasible, explore the concepts such as those recommended by the community in the Midway master plan for an intensification of use. These included offices, clinics, hotels, movie cinemas and other retail functions. Residential uses are not preferred here at this time due to the commercial nature and isolation caused by the interstate, Snelling, and University. Residential uses may be appropriate near or along University in the future.
- 3. Create a strong visual element at Snelling and St. Anthony that functions as a signature gateway to the Midway area. The structure should be of scale and quality that matches the area.
- 4. Maintain the major commercial users in the center and add others as possible. Specifically, as the market changes, seek to capture the value of University and Snelling Avenue frontages by increasing the intensity of use along the avenues, balancing the need to maintain the value of property deeper in the block.
- 5. Explore moving eastward the major transit stop from Snelling. This places the stop more centrally within the commercial district and alleviates potential traffic congestion issues at Snelling. Explore creating a hub to serve this area.
- 6. Encourage adaptive reuse of buildings that maintain the historic and eclectic character of the area.

The task force also believes that it may be appropriate to explore the feasibility of strengthening the regional shopping center between Snelling and Syndicate that includes Midway Center, Midway Marketplace and the Target Store. With coordinated planning and design, the character of the area might be substantially improved for shoppers and the surrounding community. Structured parking and improved transit service could free land for significant new commercial uses and employment. Housing may be appropriate in some areas as intensification occurs in the

area. This exploration/concept was beyond the scope of the study.

The <u>northwest corner of Snelling and University</u> is also available for new development. Community goals for the new development include:

- Signature building built at the corner of a scale that supports the style of the area (2-3 stories at the street, possibly more if upper levels are stepped back from adjacent streets);
- Parking lots better utilized and more aesthetically pleasing along Sherburne;
- Possible inclusion of the furniture store located along Snelling north of the bank.

The <u>northeast block of Snelling/University</u>, bounded on the north by Sherburne and the east by Asbury, includes a variety of retail, entertainment and office uses that are in need of more and better organized parking. Consolidating the surface lots on Sherburne into a single shared parking lot is proposed.

The <u>southwest blocks of Snelling/University</u>, between University and St. Anthony, at the time of the study had fewer potential redevelopment sites. At such time that redevelopment opportunities arise, the City should act to implement the broad goals outlined in this framework.

## **Lexington Development Concepts**

The Lexington/University intersection concepts address three core issues: the southwest superblock; creating a new library; the northwest (BP/Amoco) and southeast corners. Overall goals for this intersection include:

- Removing blighted properties and redeveloping them soon;
- Intensifying the use of the land as possible:
- Maintaining the high quality parkway environment;
- Improving the public realm;
- Creating smaller blocks consistent with TOD principles, if the market supports this development type;
- Creating paths within the new development for pedestrians moving between buildings and transit stops.
- Designing new development to be compatible with existing single-family neighborhoods, such as along Central, Sherburne, and Aurora Avenues.

#### **Southwest corner**

The overarching goal is the redevelopment of this site. In all the scenarios provided, basic TOD principles are applied. No exact breakdown of uses is provided because it will be determined by the market. The purpose of this framework is to set goals for how the area functions, not the exact uses. The options remove White Castle in order to demonstrate a TOD approach; however, it is recognized that White Castle may remain as determined by the market. Similarly, since the area is currently zoned B-3 (general commercial) a traditional big box development may occur such as the formerly proposed Home Depot.

For the purposes of this study, four options were identified by the task force. They are examples of how TOD principles may be applied. They are not listed in any rank order.

#### **Primarily Housing**

This option assumes that housing of at least 60 units to the acre is built based on new housing densities built elsewhere in Saint Paul. Additionally, the model assumes primarily commercial uses on the first floor along University Avenue. Housing is more likely to be successful on the first floor along Lexington than University due to the public amenity of the parkway. This option maximizes residential use on the 9.3 acre development site. A limited amount of retail/commercial is included along University. Parking is mostly accommodated below surface and under building footprints. Buildings are shown as three, four or five stories with the middle block organized around a neighborhood park.

## Mix of Uses Including Housing

This option suggests capturing the commercial market appeal of locating along the major streets while providing some housing behind. An exact ratio of commercial to housing is not estimated. This option places a greater emphasis on commercial/retail uses in the mixed use building facing University, while still accommodating as much residential as practical. Parking is under building footprints, on-street and in limited surface lots. The middle block may potentially include a neighborhood park.

#### Single Commercial/Office Scenario

The intent of this option is to show how a large employer could use this site. This option dedicates the site to a single use such as an office campus or similar arrangement. The site may accommodate approximately 170,000-180,000 sf of commercial uses served by surface parking. Additional square footage may be accommodated with the use of structured parking.

#### Urban Big-Box Model

Based on examples occurring in other cities, it is possible to imagine one of the major chains building one of the newer "urban models." Typically these are about half the size of the larger big boxes, ranging in size from 40-60,000 sf. This option is similar to the Single Commercial/Office Scenario in that it is a single use but includes a large format retail facing University. This urban format would have a floorplate from 40,000 to 60,000 sf arranged in a 2-story configuration. Surface parking would be located internal to the block.

#### **Northwest corner**

The northwest corner currently has significant vacant land. The primary property owners are Hoa Bien restaurant and BP/Amoco. The general goal is to create a signature building at the corner of University and Lexington that supports the Parkway atmosphere. Community members urged a building of at least 2 stories but no more than 4 to prevent shadows from negatively impacting residential property owners on the north side of the alley.

#### Library options

The construction of a new library is a priority for the community and the City. The library needs to remain near the intersection of University and Lexington in order to sustain the partnership

with the Hubbs Center and easy access to Central High School. Due to the lack of a specific proposal to review including possible impacts, this framework makes no site recommendation. However, community members believe the new facility should have a strong presence on University or Lexington.

#### **Blocks south and west of Dunlap and University**

To the west of the vacant southwest superblock at Lexington are two additional superblocks with many business properties. These include a series of medical buildings, auto related uses, Bally's gym, and the now vacant 3M building. In general the TOD principles are applicable here, however development should be phased in as appropriate without detrimental impact on vibrant businesses

## **Blocks Between University and Sherburne**

Most blocks between University and Sherburne, and University and Aurora, have an alley between residential and commercial uses. For years, neighbors and businesses have struggled to address the frequent problems of dumping, crime, etc. that plague many of these alleys. There has also been occasional tension as businesses, desperate for land to grow, have tried to grow across the alley, while residents tried to protect the residential character of Sherburne and Aurora. One goal of this study was to explore if it is possible to build new housing and/or commercial buildings that would protect and enhance the residential neighborhood and be vibrant on University. While no such development is planned at this time, City staff who have researched growth trends in other cities believe that there will be pressure for such development in the future.

#### Community Goals

The following goals are intended for new development between Sherburne and University.

- All new development should continue to support a vibrant residential and commercial environment. New development should maintain if not increase adjacent property values.
- All new development must create a positive living environment for all residents along Sherburne. Loading docks, trash bins, etc. should be visually and audibly shielded from the residents across the street.
- New construction heights should be limited as to not create significant shadows on properties to the north. This is to insure sufficient sunlight for melting snow and allowing gardens.
- New construction should provide ample off-street parking; due to the presence of numerous multi-unit buildings parking is already limited on some blocks.
- In cases where the alley may be removed or turned to exit onto University or Sherburne, the proposed new building requesting this change must demonstrate sufficient non-alley access to the parcel for its users.
- Each proposed development must be evaluated on its own individual merit with input from adjacent property owners and the neighborhood.

This study does not recommend or require any specific rezoning of properties in the study area and is not intended to render any existing buildings or uses "nonconforming."

## **Planning Process**

The Saint Paul Planning Commission established a task force in Spring 2002 with representation from the neighborhood organizations along University Avenue, University Avenue businesses, elected officials, and a couple of non-profit organizations located on the Avenue. The task force met regularly over the course of 9 months. In addition four community workshops were held; approximately100 people attended each. A draft and revised draft were released to the public for comment (November 2002/February 2003). A final draft was adopted by the Task Force on March 26, 2003. The Saint Paul Planning Commission held a public hearing and recommended the plan to the City Council on July 25, 2003. The City Council held a public hearing and approved the plan on February 25, 2004 concurrently with the University and Dale TOD study. City staff with support from consultants facilitated the process and creation of the framework.

## TOD STUDY AREA MAP



Figure 2. TOD Study Areas